

Easing the transition

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The process of transition from primary to secondary school has always been an area of interest in particular to those delivering design and technology. Here as she completes her second year of teaching, Flexible PGCE Course Leader Dawne Bell catches up with ex-trainee Jen Caudrelier at her school Ashton Community Science College, Preston, to find out more about the rationale behind a unique Year 6 enhanced programme of transition.

Ashton Community Science College has a Special Educational Resource Facility for deaf children. They have a dedicated team of staff who work within the Deaf Support Department, that include teachers of the deaf and teaching assistants who are extremely well qualified and have a wealth of experience to be able to deliver a superb differentiated curriculum to deaf students.

Jen explains, "Transition work has always been a priority at Ashton but timetable commitments can frequently 'get in the way', however this year I was released from teaching commitments in order to further develop and enhance an existing programme of transition for our feeder special primary school Royal Cross".

Jen goes on to say why conducting regular transition work is of vital importance. "It is vital that deaf students are given specific opportunity to ask questions about school life, you cannot assume that deaf students know what other (hearing) students may already know".

Identifying the concerns

In developing the programme, which was originally devised by Headteacher Chris Lickiss, Jen engaged with all stakeholders in order to gain an understanding of each perspective and viewpoint. After discourse with primary school teachers of the deaf students Jen identified that the underlying fear in the vast majority of cases was not just 'starting secondary school' but it was the physical 'moving from one school to another' which was identified as their key concern.



Unpicking the concerns of the students themselves was a little more complex as Jen explains; "It would be easy to overlook some of the very simple aspects of the process of transition. For example: for any child the experience of having to sit in a classroom with twenty-four students you don't know for the first time ever is daunting enough, so when you consider that a deaf student may never have been in a class of that size, it could be extremely intimidating".

From her discussions with students, Jen goes on to explain; "this coupled with the fact that it could be the first time they are with other students who cannot sign or have a limited understanding of deafness, and therefore cannot communicate with them appropriately you need to be aware this could potentially be traumatic. Many deaf children from specialised primary schools haven't ever been in a school where they can't communicate with every adult in the building, secondary school is frightening enough when you are eleven without adding on all of these other factors".

Necessary skills

Teaching staff at the school also played a part in the programmes creation as Jen explains "we need to ensure that all teachers at Ashton have the necessary skills to support all of our students effectively and we are very fortunate to have a head teacher who recognises this and ensures time is set aside for staff to provide high levels of in-service training to colleagues new to the school". Our Deaf Support Team regularly provides in-house training for new staff and PGCE students alike, and of course are always on hand to answer any questions that existing staff may have on a daily basis. Currently there is training being delivered to some teaching assistants who will be working with deaf students next year to ensure they can support them appropriately".



The students are taught within mainstream lessons with specialised support from a teaching assistant or a teacher of the deaf. On other occasions they are taught as a group of only deaf students. The whole approach has been carefully designed to enable full integration, whilst facilitating vast and varied levels of differentiation to take place. The curriculum really is tailored to suit the needs of, and meet the individual demands of each student.

Earlier in the year, for a period of five weeks, Jen worked with four deaf students from Year 6 at Royal Cross primary school who were due to start secondary school in September; "They had been attending Ashton for one full day a week to experience life in a secondary school. This is especially important for the students because it is not only about experiencing a secondary school, but also experiencing a mainstream school as these students have only ever attended a special school".

"During their day in school they have 'sampled' a variety of lessons. These include textiles, resistant materials, ICT and Science (Ashton is a specialist Science College). During their lessons they have been working in groups alongside current Year 7 students and have been following Year 7 schemes of work. In developing the programme, acting upon feedback from students and primary school teachers, they have also had lessons learning about the school itself, the building, structure of the school day, getting to know members of the Deaf Support Team, in addition to continuing work in numeracy and literacy."



Positive feedback

Jen firmly believes that having the ability to communicate effectively with the students is key. Without effective engagement ultimately the students are unable to learn; "Deaf students miss out on a lot of information that other children just acquire by over hearing adults or other children talking" she goes onto explain "and it is this 'missing out' which creates a delay in the children's knowledge of the world around them."

So far the feedback from all stakeholders following the programmes implementation has been overwhelmingly positive. Parents in particular have been extremely pleased with the transition 'timetable', and have reported that they believe their children are less anxious about starting their new school in September.

As she moves into her third year of teaching, Jen is excited about the new challenges ahead. This year she has been timetabled to spend one third of her time teaching design and technology with the rest of her time working within the Deaf Support Department.

About Jen

Jen is an ex-flexible PGCE trainee who has just completed a very successful second year of teaching. Having gained a degree in Deaf Studies prior to completing a PGDip in BSL/English Interpreting Jen gained a substantial background working with members of the hearing impaired community over a ten year period. Coming from a 'family of teachers' Jen had always aspired to teach but she also had a very strong desire to utilise her skills, and desperately wanted to continue her work with deaf people. It was through her work as an interpreter, the majority of which was based specifically within a variety of educational settings, that Jen began to realise how she could possibly combine the two.

Whilst working within a large mainstream secondary school Jen realised the potential of linking her specific communication skills with the teaching of design and technology. Reflecting upon her observations Jen realised that irrespective of the discipline being taught, above any other curriculum subject the design and technology teachers she observed "were communicating with students in many different ways, on many different levels in almost all lessons, because deaf students are excellent 'visual' learners" she goes on to clarify, "As a qualified interpreter I knew that I had the necessary language skills to be able to work with deaf children and to be able to give them input in lessons in their first or preferred language at a fluent level". Having witnessed how the design and technology teachers taught I knew it would work well, I could marry the two together and enable me to utilise my skills."

On developing a sufficiently satisfactory level of subject knowledge in design and technology Jen explains; "It wasn't easy! I had to learn how to do the things myself first and then how to teach it to the class. The extra hours in the workshop and reading paid off, and I feel I have a good level of knowledge that is appropriate to stand in front of a class with. I realise I'm always going to have to work hard to develop my subject knowledge, but isn't that the same for any teacher of design and technology if they want to keep up to date with the pace of change?"

Jen was one of the first candidates accepted onto the Flexible PGCE without what would normally be considered to be a 'subject related degree'. Employment rates of these unique trainees has been 100% and this is due in part to the additional skills they can bring to the classroom to support children's learning.

